DOLPHINS DEPREDATING (STEALING) BAIT/CATCH

What is depredation?

Depredation is the removal of, or damage to, captured fish or bait (commercial or recreational), caused by predators. Dolphins are known to depredate, or steal, both the bait and catch of recreational anglers. In some cases, dolphins steal the bait and catch directly off recreational gear, leaving the gear intact and escaping without being hooked or entangled in monofilament. In other cases, the fishing line snaps and the dolphin steals the catch or bait with the gear still attached. This increases the dolphin's risk of injury or death from ingestion of hooks and lures and/or entanglement in monofilament line.

Why do dolphins steal bait/catch from recreational fishing gear?

Although unclear exactly what triggers this type of behavior, it may be the result of many factors, such as:

- Illegal feeding of wild dolphins (NMFS 1994; Hanan et al. 1989)
- Changes in fishing effort (Zollett and Read 2006; Donoghue et al. 2003)
- Natural, environmental factors, such as localized depleted fish stocks (Wells pers. comm.)

Despite the uncertainty in the exact cause of depredatory behavior, illegally feeding wild dolphins contributes to this problem by negatively altering dolphins' foraging strategy (NMFS 1994; Hanan et al. 1989). When humans feed wild dolphins, they associate people with free handouts and an easy meal, thus reinforcing stealing behavior. This makes dolphins less wary of humans, alters their natural behaviors, and increases their vulnerability to injury and death. Additionally, dolphins may come into close contact with anglers, which increase the risk of accidental entanglement in fishing gear. Cases have been reported where these unnatural behaviors are being passed on to calves and other dolphins, resulting in new generations of wild dolphins learning to beg for food and steal from anglers' gear (NMFS 1994).

Do dolphins steal all types of bait and catch?

Dolphins are known to steal various types of bait, both dead and alive, as well as catch (e.g., grouper, sheepshead, and Spanish mackerel) from recreational fishing gear, including catch attached to artificial lures. Literature has also documented depredation in the Florida king mackerel troll fishery off Florida's east coast (Zollett and Read 2006).

Is the increase in depredation a result of dolphins not having enough to eat due to red tide?

The information is currently inconclusive. The Sarasota Dolphin Research Program, based at Mote Marine Laboratory, has documented that pinfish stocks in Sarasota Bay

were significantly depleted after the severe 2005 red tide event, and pinfish are the top prey item of bottlenose dolphins in Sarasota Bay (as well as a favored bait). Recent health assessments of dolphins in Sarasota Bay showed many to be significantly below expected weights, probably as a result of depleted prey fish stocks from the red tide (Wells pers. comm.). It is interesting, however, that increasing depredation has also been observed in areas that were not hit by the 2005 red tide event, such as the Indian River Lagoon. It may be that more than one factor is contributing to causing this problem in different areas.